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## NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF "UNEMPLOYMENT" AND RELIEF MEASURES IN THE UNITED STATES.

### I.

"ANY further writing upon the condition of the unemployed ought," says a somewhat facetious critic, "to bear the sub-title 'a study in introspection.'" The long-suffering reader may possibly so far sympathize with this gentle sarcasm as to feel that with returning prosperity any person might be better employed than in examining the phenomena of "unemployment." Certain aspects, however, of what is called, rather loosely, "the problem of the unemployed" are permanent, and such other aspects of it as are fortunately temporary are, nevertheless, certain to recur at somewhat regular intervals. It is important that the whole problem be further considered (even perhaps *ad nauseam*) to the end that we may draw from our late experiences some lessons as regards more adequate methods and measures for meeting the problems which have been so painfully brought home to us during the late depression. These considerations may perhaps excuse the present paper, which indeed bears only indirectly upon the present aspects of the problem—being merely the setting forth of a few scattered historical data upon the previous periods of "unemployment" in the United States and upon measures adopted for the relief of the resulting distress.

Incidentally the paper will touch upon certain more general aspects of the development of charitable agencies and methods in this country. The subject is one of considerable interest, and does not appear to have been very adequately treated. So valuable a work, for example, as Dr. Warner's *American Charities* (New York, 1894) not only fails to give any account of the historical development of charitable agencies but even conveys

the impression that right methods and careful thinking in regard to poor-relief are wholly a product of recent manufacture, that scientific charity is indeed an "infant industry" in this country.<sup>1</sup> It is doubtless true that the general public has been all along—except, perhaps, when the seriousness of the problems of poverty has been brought home to it by some special emergency—somewhat careless and something too optimistic. But one need not search far among the archives of comparatively early charitable enterprises to find evidences of the influence and practical work of "charity experts" who grappled wisely and firmly with the difficulties of their day. Thus we find the essential principle of relief work clearly set forth by Joseph Tuckerman, Minister at Large in Boston, in his pamphlet on the *Public Relief of the Poor*, published in 1833, in the following words: "For the idle and able-bodied, the intemperate and the improvident, who apply for alms, work or the opportunity to work should be provided."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the principle had been before this carried into practice in some of our public charities. In 1821 the Committee on the Subject of Pauperism and a House of Industry in the Town of Boston—of which committee no less a person than Josiah Quincy acted as chairman—report that the great defect in the Boston system is that suitable work cannot, "*for lack of accommodation*," be provided, and recommend the establishment, in addition to the almshouse, of a house of industry, affirming that every town in the commonwealth which has resorted to them has derived "great and sensible relief from the burden of maintaining the poor."<sup>3</sup> The house of industry was accordingly erected in Boston in the same year. Eleven years later we find a legislative commission appointed to suggest improvements in the system of

<sup>1</sup> "This country was too young to bother with industrial science. . . . Least of all was it imagined that we need give serious attention to poor-relief. It was intimated or asserted that we were quarantined against poverty and distress by our glorious Constitution and Declaration of Independence."—*American Charities*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in JOSEPH TUCKERMAN, *The Elevation of the Poor*, edited by E. E. HALE (Boston, 1874), p. 174.

<sup>3</sup> *Report of the Committee on the Subject of Pauperism and a House of Industry in the Town of Boston* (Boston, 1821).

poor-relief, recommending the creation of well organized work-houses for "the protection of the industrious and the thrifty against the demands and incursions of the idle and able-bodied."<sup>1</sup> The legislature of Pennsylvania, by the Act of March 5, 1828, expressly authorized the Philadelphia Board of Guardians of the Poor to detain paupers sent to the almshouse "until they have compensated by their labour for the expenses incurred on their account." We know, moreover, that as early as 1834 the work-houses of Baltimore and New York, as well as Boston, Charlestown, and Salem, furnished their inmates with employment, in some cases in a considerable variety of industries, such, for example, as the making of cloth and of shoes, and the picking of wool.<sup>2</sup> We shall, as we proceed, find further instances of scientific ideas and methods in relief of the poor.

It is sometimes assumed that "unemployment" is a distinctly new phenomenon among us, or at any rate that it has of late prevailed to an altogether unprecedented degree. It has been urged, for example, as against the argument that the condition of wage-earners has been for the past half century pretty constantly improving, as evidenced by the upward tendency of "real (daily) wages," that the increasing difficulty of obtaining steady work largely obliterates the apparent improvement. It is no doubt true that unsteady employment is in the long run an increasing difficulty. But the "good old days" were by no means free from hardships from this source scarcely less severe than those which we have lately experienced. Dr. Joseph Tuckerman, who is certainly an excellent witness, writing of conditions in Boston about 1830 tells us that "it is well known that a large number of those who have depended on their wages or their small salaries for the support of their families within the past year have been thrown out of employment," "in consequence of the prevailing embarrassments in commerce and

<sup>1</sup> *The Elevation of the Poor*, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup> *Report of a Committee appointed by the Guardians for the Relief and Employment of the Poor of Philadelphia to visit the Almshouses of Baltimore, New York, Boston, and Salem* (Philadelphia, 1834).

in mercantile enterprise," "while hundreds have not been able to obtain more than the work of a day or two in a week," and he speaks, moreover, of the frequent occurrence of periods during which large numbers in our cities find it impossible to procure any employment whatever.<sup>1</sup> A somewhat more graphic picture is set forth by a "Citizen of Philadelphia" in a pamphlet of 1836. "Condescend," he says, "to lounge along the wharves, from Catherine street to Callowhill street, in summer, and take notice of the scores of poor men, with their horses and saws, and scores, likewise, of wood pilers, both classes anxiously seeking for work. . . . These two classes are in winter almost entirely unemployed. The case is nearly the same with labourers generally."<sup>2</sup> Or if one distrusts the statement of this possibly sentimental Philadelphian, we may cite instead the estimate of the *New York Times* that during the crisis of 1837 there were 50,000 persons out of employment in the metropolis.<sup>3</sup> In the latter part of the same year in the midst of the depression in New York "many thousand laborers," we are told, "petitioned the common council for work, alleging that their families were in want of food."<sup>4</sup>

The following description of the experience of New York in 1838 may be somewhat overdrawn, but it no doubt rests upon a large substratum of truth:

The winter of 1838 was unusually severe. The times were hard, fuel and food were dear, many thousands of men and women were out of employment. As the cold months wore slowly on . . . the number of the unemployed increased to such a degree that the ordinary means were inadequate to relieve even those who were destitute of every one

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-79.

<sup>2</sup> *A Plea for the Poor: an inquiry how far the charges against them of improvidence, idleness and dissipation are founded in truth*, by a Citizen of Philadelphia (Philadelphia, 1836).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Boston Advertiser*, September 19, 1837.—This citation and some of the following are collected in the *Report of the Massachusetts Board to Investigate the Subject of the Unemployed* (Boston, 1895), Part IV, Appendix A.

<sup>4</sup> '37 and '57: *A Brief Popular Account of all Financial Panics in the United States*, by Members of the New York Press (New York, 1857) p. 25.

of the necessities of life. Some died of starvation, some were frozen to death, many through exposure and privation contracted fatal diseases. A large number who had never before known want were reduced to beg. . . . Extraordinary measures were taken by the comfortable classes to relieve the sufferings of their unfortunate fellow citizens. Meetings were held, subscriptions were made, committees were appointed.<sup>1</sup> . . . "In the better part of the sixth ward, a large number of mechanics lived, whose cry was, not for bread and fuel of charity, but for *work*. Charity their honest souls disdained. Its food choked them, its fire chilled them. Work, give us work! was their eager, passionate demand."<sup>2</sup>

Conditions were apparently no better in 1839, if we may trust the New York correspondent of the Boston *Atlas*. "There is no proper or advisable relief, nothing to improve the condition of our thousands who, destitute of employment and the fruits of employment, look anxiously and fearfully into the winter now closing down upon them. During the eight years of my residence here I am sure I never saw it so dull as at present. So little doing, so many seeking employment, so few obtaining it, and so general a depression of all mechanical and manufacturing interests."<sup>3</sup>

In the following years conditions were greatly improved, and still from time to time the newspapers make mention of distress from lack of work. In 1842 a great part of the woolen machinery of New England is said to be at a stand.<sup>4</sup> In 1851 the Boston *Atlas* estimates that "no less than a half million of laborers and artisans have been deprived of their occupation in the United States by the tariff of 1846." In October 1856 "not less than 10,000 capable and worthy men and women in New York are," we are told, "anxiously seeking for something to do, which number will be greatly increased as soon as the fall trade is over."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*—This last is cited from the *Life of Horace Greeley*. Horace Greeley served on a relief committee in the sixth ward—one of the poorest wards in the city.

<sup>3</sup> Boston *Atlas*, November 25, 1839.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

<sup>4</sup> Boston *Atlas*, July 1, 1842.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

<sup>5</sup> Boston *Atlas*, October 13, 1856.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

When we come to the crisis of 1857, we find the troubles of the unemployed reported from all sections of the country with a generality that strongly resembles the accounts of the conditions during the late depression. In fifty-eight manufacturing establishments of Philadelphia nearly half of the force were discharged, and 40,000 persons were said to be out of employment in the city.<sup>1</sup> The mayor of New York estimated the number of the unemployed at 70,000,<sup>2</sup> and whether or not they were so numerous as these figures would indicate they were sufficiently turbulent to bring on at least two miniature riots.<sup>3</sup> Similar reports are rife in the newspapers of 1858:

Buffalo, Chicago, and other western cities, it appears, are overrun with laborers and mechanics who are unable to find employment. In the former place, last week, several hundred of this class paraded the streets, demanding "work or bread." In Chicago the demand for labor by poor people has been so great that the street commissioner has been able to supply each man but two days' work in a week, at seventy-five cents per day. It is now thought best to cut wages down to fifty cents, and put one-third more men into the city service. At fifty cents per day, says the *Democrat*, the city will be overwhelmed with applications for labor.

It is difficult to obtain anything but fragmentary bits of information as to the means that were resorted to from time to time during this period prior to the war, to meet the problem of unemployment or indeed in general the problem of the relief of the poor. We can however refer to the record of certain efforts which are probably fairly typical of many others that must have been set on foot. Most of the data here presented are of necessity drawn from the records of experiments undertaken in Boston.

Of the early organized societies of that city for the relief of the poor, the Howard Benevolent Society was organized in 1812.

<sup>1</sup> *Boston Journal*, October 21 and 22, 1857.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

<sup>2</sup> *Boston Journal*, October 24, 1857.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

<sup>3</sup> *Boston Traveller*, October 30, 1857.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.  
*Boston Transcript*, November 4, 1857.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

Its method of relief took the form of orders upon stores for groceries or clothing. In 1850 its annual expenditure was reported to be about \$2500 or \$3000. The Young Men's Benevolent Society, with similar methods, was organized in 1827. Its expenditure in 1850 was about \$1000 per annum. The Society for the Prevention of Pauperism was incorporated in 1847 with the distinct object of removing pauperism by obtaining and communicating information and aiding to find employment.<sup>1</sup> The Boston Provident Association was organized in the year 1851.

Among the minor agencies which sprang up in Boston during the period, the most interesting for our purposes is "the Society for Employing the Female Poor" which was started in 1820 under the encouragement of Rev. William E. Channing and Rev. Charles Lowell with the "sole object to make provision for the employment of the poor." The quaint report of 1824 states that the society has greatly "increased the industry of those whom they have employed," many of them had been so well trained that they could find private employment, and some had been rendered wholly independent. In 1825 the society established a training laundry in addition to its sewing room.<sup>2</sup>

The Union Benevolent Association of Philadelphia is said to be among the first of general relief societies organized in the United States "for the encouragement of industry, the suppression of pauperism, and the relief of suffering among the poor." The Indianapolis Benevolent Society was founded in 1836; the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor in 1843; the Chicago Relief and Aid Society in 1857.<sup>3</sup>

Somewhat more particulars are available with reference to the

<sup>1</sup> *Report of a Committee on the Subject of a New Organization for the Relief of Pauperism* (Boston, 1850), CHARLES F. BARNARD. *To the Delegates of the Benevolent Societies of Boston* (1836); *Record of Charity* (Boston), vol. i., No. 3.

<sup>2</sup> *An Explanation of the Views of the Society for Employing the Female Poor* (Cambridge, 1825).

<sup>3</sup> REV. C. G. TRUSDELL: *The History of Public and Private Indoor and Outdoor Relief*, in *Proceedings of the National Congress of Charities and Correction*, 1893, pp. 94-105.



Baltimore Society for the Improvement of the Poor, organized in 1849, and incidentally with reference to earlier conditions in that city. The manual of the society for 1850 pointed out the evils arising from the temporary character of previous organizations which had been called into existence only at times of unusual emergency. It sought to effect a discontinuance of indiscriminate almsgiving, and strongly indorsed the principle of the work-test, but it failed to adhere to this approved system,<sup>1</sup> and apparently drifted into careless methods. In 1857 it was assisting to a greater or less extent 15,000 persons, and its reports are rather unscientific ideals of charity.<sup>2</sup>

These examples are fairly indicative of the character of charitable organizations of the period. Of course there were various experiments of an impromptu sort which were called out from time to time as the exigencies of the situation seemed to demand. The establishment of soup-houses, for example, is not infrequently mentioned by the papers and lamented by the charity experts of the time, and no doubt there was often a ready flow of the nutritious fluid which has been characterized by Dr. Wayland as scarcely less harmful than alcohol to the welfare of the human race.

There does not appear to have been frequent resort to public work as a means of helping the unemployed in periods of special emergency. There is, however, one important instance of such resort to public employment with some notice of which we may close the present paper—the improvement of Central Park in 1856 and the following years. It is difficult to say with the scanty material at command to what extent the expenditure was prompted primarily to provide work, but it is certain that this motive had considerable influence in determining at least the time and manner of doing the work.

The “Central Park Fund” of \$2,867,000 appears to have

<sup>1</sup> AMOS G. WARNER: *The Charities of Baltimore*, in *Report of a Conference of Charities held at Baltimore April 15 and 16, 1887* (Baltimore, 1887), pp. 133–156.

<sup>2</sup> *A Plea for the Poor, being the Eighth Annual Report of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor* (Baltimore, 1857).

been provided for in the statute of February 29, 1856, but the raising of specific portions of the loan occurred from time to time as sanctioned by the municipal authorities.<sup>1</sup> In October 1857 the mayor recommended the employment of workless laborers upon public works in return for provisions to be furnished them at cost price.<sup>2</sup> In November the comptroller of the city agreed to "advance the Central Park commissioners unemployed moneys from the city treasury at the rate of \$1000 per day, or \$6000 per week, until the time should arrive for taking the bonds for \$25,000," when "the matter would rest entirely with the commissioners themselves."<sup>3</sup> The commissions agreed to select their laborers (not exceeding 1000) proportionately and regularly from actual residents in each ward. The emergency employment apparently continued at least well into 1859, and if we may judge by the statement of the commissions, with good results.<sup>4</sup> The attitude of the city authorities is clearly shown in the following resolutions which were approved by the mayor, December 30, 1858.

*Whereas*, It is well understood that the commissioners of the Central Park are about to discharge many of the laboring men employed on the Park; and

*Whereas*, The discharge of these men who have no other means of subsistence this winter would necessarily produce great want and suffering in their families and cause them to become a burthen upon the city; therefore,

*Resolved*, That the Common Council believe it will be more judicious to retain these men in employment, and respectfully request the commissioners of the Central Park to employ the present complement of men on the Central Park until the first day of May next, at one dollar per day.

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

CARLOS C. CLOSSON.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the New York Board of Aldermen and Board of Councilmen*, 1858, pp. 144, 312, 400; *Laws of New York*, 1857, Chap. 771.

<sup>2</sup> *Boston Journal*, October 24, 1857.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

<sup>3</sup> *Boston Post*, November 14, 1857.—Cited by *Report of the Massachusetts Board*.

<sup>4</sup> "The Board (of Commissioners) allude to the system and order of the conduct of the work and the discipline of the force with satisfaction."—*Proceedings of Board of Aldermen*, vol. lxxii., p. 133.